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## How does the UN talk about human mobility? A textual analysis of narratives by IOM and UNHCR on migrants and refugees

Brandon Green & Antoine Pécoud

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## **How does the UN talk about human mobility? A textual analysis of narratives by IOM and UNHCR on migrants and refugees**

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## **Abstract**

In the absence of a binding and coherent international migration regime, the global governance of migration relies on normative narratives produced by UN agencies and other intergovernmental processes, in line with the discursive legitimacy traditionally associated with international organizations. Such narratives impact migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees because they support certain policy frameworks among member states. Yet, global migration governance remains fragmented, especially as far as the long-standing divide between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is concerned. This article contributes to this discussion by applying Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis to the narratives produced by these two organizations. The article identifies some of the dominant worldviews in the narratives of IOM and UNHCR. Results show that IOM and UNHCR have distinct worldviews, associated with different textual patterns, and that, while IOM's textual productions seem to influence UNHCR's discourses, the opposite is less true. This would support the view that IOM is currently the leading actor in terms of framing migration, thereby exerting a strong influence on global migration governance.

**Keywords:** Global migration governance, migration crisis, refugee crisis, discourse analysis, International Organization for Migration, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## Introduction

International migration has become a key issue in world politics. Many Western migrant-receiving countries experience bitter political debates over migration and refugee policy, while the mobility of migrants and refugees has, over the past decade, led to political and humanitarian crises throughout the world, for example in the Euro-Mediterranean region, at the border between the United States and Mexico, in South America with the Venezuelans leaving their country, or in South-East Asia with the Rohingya fleeing Myanmar (Menjivar et al., 2019). These crises have caught the attention of the United Nations (UN), which has strived to mobilise states and promote multilateral efforts to address the issues raised by the cross-border mobility of people.

But migration is not an easy topic for the UN. It is the object of deep disagreements, both between states (along the sending/receiving divide in particular), and within them (between governments, civil society and the private sector). It is also an issue closely associated with state sovereignty, leading governments to resist UN-sponsored initiatives. Inside the UN, several agencies deal with the topic, leading to organisational complexity and competition. One of the outcomes of these divergences is to be found in the language used: people on the move can for instance be referred to as migrants, refugees, forced migrants, displaced people, etc. Each of these labels conveys different legal and political meanings, leading to often intense debates, not only at the UN or among governments, but also in the media for example.

This article contributes to this discussion by investigating how the UN speaks about people on the move. It draws on a textual analysis of the narratives produced by the UN, with a focus on the two main UN agencies in the field, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The analysis focuses on the period between 2006 and 2020, and on the media releases produced by the two organizations – with the objective of understanding how they speak to the media and, through the media, to the world at large.

The relationship between IOM and UNHCR is a central and long-standing issue in the global governance of migration. Both organizations were founded in 1951 and have a mandate centred on the mobility of people. Since IOM joined the UN in 2016, both also belong to the UN system and are central actors in multilateral cooperation over refugee and migration policy. IOM and UNHCR thus often do the same kind of work, like providing humanitarian support to forcibly-displaced people, and are therefore frequently in competition with each other. Yet, IOM and UNHCR differ substantially in their mandate and normative/legal framework. UNHCR focuses on refugees, relying on international human rights law and the right to seek asylum; by contrast, IOM's population of concern is composed of migrants, making for a much broader (and arguably vaguer) mandate, without clear references to human rights. The two agencies also have different histories: once fairly marginal, IOM gained visibility and influence since the end of the Cold war and has been challenging UNHCR, a well-established agency that nevertheless struggles to uphold its mandate, in a context in which states are reluctant towards the admission of refugees and growingly concerned with security and border control.

IOs are known to play a role in shaping the ways in which global issues are framed and discussed. Our analysis draws upon the assumption that the ways in which UN agencies talk about people on the move matters in terms of the political treatment of migrants and refugees worldwide. This is all the more the case because migrants and refugees tend to lack influence over the narratives that are produced about them: while discourses on the topic flourish, very few of them emanate from migrants or refugees themselves – illustrating how even seemingly generous and well-intentioned narratives can build upon (and reproduce) power relations (Van Dijk, 1996). Moreover, the contemporary mobility of both refugees and migrants is frequently apprehended through a security lens – a lens that, as Huysmans (2006) argues, comes along narratives that identify certain minority groups and places them in antagonistic (and often fearful) relationships to other groups. This calls for a critical analysis of the narratives produced about

people on the move, and for the embeddedness of such critical discourse analysis in critical social research at large.

The exploratory article is structured around three core premises. The first regards the differences and similarities between IOM and UNHCR narratives: whether these two agencies speak differently, especially with regards to how they describe migration mechanisms and phenomena, and whether (and how) this reflects differing worldviews to their respective audiences. Second whether changes occur over time, particularly as far as the labels refugees and migrants are concerned, and how this is reflective of IOM and UNHCR's respective mandates and distinct narrative patterns. Third, we look at a specific and widely-commented issue, namely irregular migration by boat, and explore how this issue is apprehended by IOM and UNHCR over time.

The article is structured in the following way. It first provides a brief overview of IOM and UNHCR, and of their relationship and respective role in global migration governance. The second section addresses the role of IOs as text-producers, and the importance of these narratives in global governance and migration policy. The third section details the methodology and corpus of our analysis. The remaining three sections then address the three key research questions and expose the main results of the analysis.

## **IOM and UNHCR in global migration governance**

In 2018, the international community adopted two 'Global Compacts' under the auspices of the United Nations: the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Global Compact on Migration or GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). Both documents are designed to outline a number of core principles that should guide states' attitudes towards people on the move, while also facilitating multilateral cooperation. The Compacts are non-binding in the sense that, unlike international law, they propose only 'soft law' recommendations. They address migrants and refugees separately, which at first sight reinforces the long-standing distinction between the two categories. Yet, both texts were drafted and negotiated in parallel and understood as part of a joint process (not least because certain issues could have been discussed on one side or the other). The two Compacts therefore mirror each other and make sense only if taken together – a situation that illustrates the relationship between refugee and migration governance and, by the same token, between UNHCR and IOM: extremely close and deeply interconnected, but formally distinct and with contested boundaries.

Illustrative of this interpolated relationship between the Compacts and the two organisations is the contrast that took place during the negotiation and drafting of these documents. UNHCR, for its part, was in an explicit leadership position during the development of the GCR, overseeing the process and ultimately presenting it in December 2018 to the UN General Assembly (Ferris & Martin, 2019). While not without its turbulence, the process of drafting the GCR had a clear normative and organisational leader in UNHCR. The Migration Compact, however, was negotiated and drafted in a dramatically different way. While IOM was involved in the negotiations for the GCM it was as one of many IO, NGO, or other actors. Instead of an organisational head, the UN General Assembly named the ambassadors of Mexico and Switzerland to manage the day-to-day work of the overall process (Ferris & Donato, 2020). This delineation of mandate and actions relates to the agencies' respective backgrounds.

UNHCR was created in 1950 with a mandate grounded in international human rights law (and codified in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees). It works with refugees worldwide, both to ensure their fundamental right to seek protection, and to provide the humanitarian support needed in situations of conflicts and displacement. Taken together, the Refugee Convention and the UNHCR make for a refugee regime that has proven central in world politics (Loescher et al., 2011). IOM was founded in 1951, just a few months after the UNHCR,

and as its counterpart: while UNHCR was to protect people, IOM had no rights-based mandate and was tasked to facilitate their mobility (in a context marked by massive displacement in Europe following WW2). Unlike the UNHCR, IOM has long occupied a fairly marginal position outside the UN system, and with a limited number of member-states. In 1989, however, it became a permanent organization and has since then experienced substantial growth, eventually joining the UN in 2016 (Elie 2010, Pécoud, 2018).

IOM's growth over the past three decades took place in a context in which asylum and migration turned into politicised issues, especially in the Global North, and governments became concerned about their ability to control their borders. These preoccupations with unauthorised migration – and the consequent securitisation of migration and asylum policy – proved uneasy for UNHCR's rights-based approach; it symmetrically favoured the expansion of IOM, an agency that provides services to help migrant-receiving states control (or 'manage') migration. UNHCR thus became a 'challenged institution' (Betts, 2013), with IOM being one of the 'challenging institutions' (Korneev, 2018).

The relationship between IOM and UNHCR is the object of diverging interpretations. According to a frequent argument, the two agencies represent two different philosophies of migration governance (Pécoud, 2021). UNHCR embodies a rights-based approach focused on the protection and needs of people on the move, while IOM follows a 'management' logic, premised on states' sovereign right to control migration and on an economic aspiration to optimise the benefits of migration. From that perspective, IOM and UNHCR have different objectives and worldviews and they compete to influence states' priorities and set the agenda of global migration governance.

But to other observers, this clear-cut opposition should be nuanced and the differences between the two agencies would make for situations of complementarity rather than opposition. According to this argument, contemporary migration governance tends to merge rights/protection- and control-related issues, in line with what is often called 'humanitarian borderwork' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Working on migrants' expulsions, Koch (2014) shows for example that IOM and UNHCR work in symbiosis: the rights-based mandate of the latter prevents it from performing controversial and highly control-oriented tasks, but legitimises IOM's efforts to return migrants. Similarly, Scheel and Ratfisch (2014) argue that UNHCR and IOM work together to set up a 'global police of population', through which people are all at the same time protected and controlled. This is the case with so-called 'mixed flows', wherein both refugees and migrants can be found, and which call for mixed interventions that provide humanitarian support to all, identify those who qualify for refugee status, and control/manage the mobility of the others.

As far as narratives are concerned, this notion of 'mixed flows' illustrates how the complementarity between IOM and UNHCR comes along semantic grey zones. Likewise, the notion of 'forced migration' is another conceptual bridge between the two agencies, as it speaks of migration (i.e. not refugees) while at the same time conveying the idea that such migration is not chosen (as in the case of refugees). Once situations are labelled as such, they can be legitimately addressed by either agencies, thereby enabling IOM to become a key actor, along with UNHCR, in policy and humanitarian interventions pertaining to forced migration (Bradley, 2017). Another grey area is environmental migration, an emerging issue that has been the object of heated debates in terms of its relationship to the refugee regime and a long-standing gap in global migration governance (IASC, 2008). In cases of long-term environmental degradation, for example, migrants may be considered to be 'forced' to leave as they utilise mobility as a tool for survival against the dangers of climate change and frequent disasters (Betts, 2011). These migrants thus share some characteristics with UNHCR's population of concern, but 'environmental migrants/refugees' are not refugees in the legal sense of the term because the Geneva Convention does not recognise the environment as a reason to be granted protection. They therefore fall outside UNHCR's mandate (which should favour their inclusion into IOM's

mandate). In practice, both agencies have been working on this issue, even if IOM has proven more dynamic than UNHCR in this respect (Hall, 2015).

The objective of this article is to assess the validity of these two interpretations (opposition vs. complementarity) in terms of the narratives produced by the two organizations. From the perspective of textual analysis, opposition should come along with neatly-divided discourses, with little overlap, whereas the existence of grey zones should result in common elements in the narratives of both agencies.

## **IOs, narratives and global governance**

The production of texts and narratives is a standard activity for IOs. All of them write and publish on the issues that fall within their mandate, whether in the forms of reports, policy briefs, speeches, media releases, newsletters, conference proceedings, etc. This comes along with the production of knowledge (through data for instance) and is often framed within an 'evidence-based' policy approach, according to which knowledge and ideas would support successful policymaking. Because IOs usually lack formal power, publications also enable them to acquire expertise - and hence legitimacy. While IOs' textual productions are regularly dismissed as pointless 'blabbity', constructivists argue that they can exert influence by shaping the ways in which global issues are thought about, and therefore governed: as Barnett and Finnemore write, 'even when they lack material resources, IOs exercise power as they constitute and construct the social world' (1999: 700).

IOM and UNHCR are no exception. IOM publishes the *World Migration Reports*, National Migration Profiles, a Migration Research Series, an academic journal, as well as countless other studies, reports, manuals, information sheets, news posts, flyers, blog posts and so on. The same can be said of the UNHCR, which is one of the most authoritative sources for data and information on refugees. Both IOM and UNHCR curate and publicise large data bases regarding migration, all widely used in policy and scholastic communities. Each also speaks through their senior management, with the High-Commissioner for Refugees and IOM's Director General continuously issuing speeches and press statements.

When it comes to global migration governance, there are a number of reasons why narratives are important. First, the choice of words to refer to people on the move matters, not only to describe and understand reality, but to govern it. In the 'real world', the distinction between *migrants* and *refugees* (or between *forced* and *voluntary* migration) is not dichotomous, but extremely complex and nuanced (Bivand Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). Policy-wise, however, people are placed in a specific category and this will have an impact on their rights, status, etc. The choice of words, for example in media or political language, can therefore influence the lens through which certain patterns of mobility will be apprehended, and therefore the political responses that will be elaborated. While this is not a new issue (Akoka, 2020), this has been a particularly sensitive topic throughout the migrant/refugee crisis in the Euro-Mediterranean region (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

Second, and as recalled above, global migration governance is not supported by a clear international regime. It is a contested field, in which states and other stakeholders (like civil society and the private sector) disagree over the strategies to follow. Moreover, and just like any global governance arena, it is a complex mechanism in which no single actor can exercise power in a top-down, hierarchical manner. It follows that all actors – including IOM and UNHCR – must struggle to convince states and other stakeholders of the relevance of their ideas and to influence the fragile norms that are being elaborated. This confers a certain importance to ideas and narratives and explains why, for example, texts such as the above-mentioned Global Compacts are the object of lengthy negotiations despite their lack of coercive power.

Our analysis builds upon an emerging field of research on the importance of IOs' narratives for migration and refugee policy. Hammerstad (2011) documents the securitisation of UNHCR's discourses in the nineties, arguing that the agency moved from a humanitarian/legal approach to a growingly security-loaded narrative in reaction to political evolutions in some of its core Western donor states. Baker and McEnery (2005) work on the representations of refugees and asylum-seekers in discourses by both UNHCR and English newspapers, showing the differences, but also the influence of the media (and of the political context) on UNHCR's narratives. As far as IOM is concerned, Campillo Carrete and Gasper (2011) analyse the 2008 *World Migration Report* to highlight the influence of capitalism and free market principles on IOM's representation of migration. Pécoud (2015) analyses the narratives produced by IOM and other IOs on migration, stressing how their apolitical and technical tone is designed to achieve a depoliticized consensus among states. These works are based on qualitative textual analysis, however, and focus on small-scale corpus, without comparing different IOs. A recent exception is Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021), who quantitatively study the annual reports produced, among others, by IOM and UNHCR and show that, while both use similar strategies to convince their member-states, IOM tends to be more optimistic and positive in the way it describes its activities than the UNHCR.

## Methodology and corpus

Methodologically, our analysis connects two approaches: "text as data" on the one hand, i.e. quantitative text analysis, based on natural language processing (NLP), machine learning (ML) and other statistical-linguistic approaches; and critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the other, which studies the creation, use and circulation of text as an issue of power. This is in line with what is referred to as computer-/corpus-assisted discourse analysis/studies (CADA/CADS). This approach combines advanced computational resources with the socio-political analysis of organizations, power relations, politics, networks, etc. (for recent examples of research mixing textual analysis and political sciences, see Fergie et al., 2019; Buckton et al., 2019). We use the CorText Manager platform created by the French *Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire Sciences Innovations Sociétés* (LISIS).<sup>1</sup> CorText is a 'platform for methodology development, software engineering and support for the analysis of corpuses of text in the social sciences and humanities', rooted in the digital humanities movement. It enables researchers to automatize much of the 'computer' work of CADA. Specifically, we use the automated term extraction and semantic network building made possible by CorText.

The methodological steps are as follows: 1) the identification of an appropriate corpus; 2) the collection and cleaning of the corpus; 3) uploading the corpus, text processing, and parsing on CorText; 4) key terms extraction; 5) curation of extracted lists and/or the creation of custom terms lists; and 6) exploration and analysis of the corpus through the creation of indirect co-occurrence networks based on the automatically extracted terms and an analysis of the development of certain terms over time. The overall purpose of the analysis is to reveal semantic clusters of key terms, which represent the core themes and topics within the text (Drieger, 2013). Overlaid with a heatmap representing the exclusivity of the terms to either IOM or UNHCR, we can visualise each agency's discursive character.

Our corpus is composed of media releases from UNHCR and IOM from January 1, 2006, to November 27, 2020. As noted above, IOs produce texts of different nature and it is therefore necessary to select specific textual items for the analysis. The reasons for choosing media releases are the following. (1) Media releases cover a very wide range of issues: as such they differ from issue-specific reports, for example, and enable a broad and aggregate overview of the topics and narratives that are of concern to IOM and UNHCR. This is in line with the purpose of

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.cortext.net/>

the article, which is to explore and compare the discursive worlds of both organizations. (2) Media releases are produced on an almost daily basis: this ensures a substantial amount of text produced over a long period of time, but for always the same purposes and therefore in a way that makes comparisons meaningful; this also enables granular insights into the changes taking place within the two organizations. (3) Media releases are produced by the organization directly (rather than by external experts) and thus tend to reflect IOs' organisational worldviews. (4) They represent a discursive routine through which IOM and UNHCR describe and comment reality: in line with a constructivist assumption, this enables an assessment of how IOs frame/construct the social world.

The corpus was collected using a Chrome Browser plugin named "Web Scraper", which is programmed to 'scrape' a given website for information embedded in a given webpage. It was programmed to gather the title, text body, and publication dates of all IOM and UNHCR media publications from their respective websites for the desired time period. These results were automatically exported in a comma separated value (csv) file. The csv file was then edited using R Studio and Google Sheets to remove 'noise', such as hyperlinks, unnecessary punctuation, dates that may be included in the body of the text, and when possible, author name and contact information, including location of publication. All textual information was otherwise kept intact and unedited.

The corpus is composed of 11,394 documents: IOM's portion consists of 7,962 news publications, while UNHCR's makes for 3,432 publications (it is smaller because of its less regularly publishing schedule). This imbalance was normalized by creating a sub-corpus of 3,432 IOM documents, made of a randomly selected sample of all IOM media releases. The working corpus then consists of 6,864 distinct documents.

This data was uploaded to CorText Manager. Parsing is the next step, which produces an SQLite database. This database can then be queried or otherwise manipulated by the platform. Once uploaded to CorText we parsed the text using various NLP techniques, which then enabled us to extract certain key terms. These key terms were analysed not only in terms of their simple raw frequency, but also in terms of the cluster they belong to – that is to say by identifying the words with which extracted terms are surrounded (van Eck & Waltman, 2011; Weeds & Weir, 2005). Via the CorText platform, this is done through computing a term frequency–inverse document frequency (tf-idf) score or a chi square specificity score (a specificity score is the statistical likelihood that a word is pertinent to the corpus). The purpose here is to establish the importance of a term in a given corpus. The logic of tf-idf is that important terms tend to occur more often in specific documents and rarely in others, rather than uniformly across all documents in a corpus. Thus, the weight of a term is increased if it is used very frequently in a few documents and relatively infrequently in others. Similarly, a chi square computes the relevance of the terms based on frequency across all other words, rather than simply the relative frequency within the documents of the corpus.

The result, in this case, was a list of 1,942 distinct terms extracted from the joint IOM-UNHCR corpus. The corpus was then indexed with the terms list. In addition to the automatically extracted list, other term lists were uploaded and parsed against the corpus. For example, as we will show in a later section, we created a list consisting of only the terms *refugee*, *migrant* and *refugee and migrant* (and all possible permutations of these three distinct terms). With these term lists in hand and indexed against the corpus, the final step was to create co-occurrence semantic networks. Semantic networks are visual representations of the ways that terms are connected to one-another in a given corpus.

In the maps that follow, each key term is represented as a node. These nodes are then connected to other data points by edges, through a calculation of their separation based on the chi-square ranking principle. Those terms that are strongly connected to many others will often merge into concentrated *clusters* of terms; alternatively, they may form *bridges* across different clusters. In the former case, terms are strongly connected to one particular idea or theme; in the



*UNHCR*. Generally speaking, the existence of quite different clusters, associated with either IOM or UNHCR, suggests that the two organizations have different ways of talking, use different words and address different issues. This being said, certain zones are pale-red or pale-blue, and therefore made of terms that are used by both agencies. There are also clusters where both colours coexist (for example at the bottom-right of the figure, around the word *IDPs*). Finally, there are in-between zones, at roughly equal distance of the words *IOM* and *UNHCR*, for instance around *refugees and migrants*, which shows possible overlaps between each agency's narratives. In order to enable a closer analysis, Figures 2 to 4 show magnified representations of the overall map, focusing on the top of Figure 1 (Figure 2), on the bottom left (Figure 3), and on the bottom right (Figure 4).

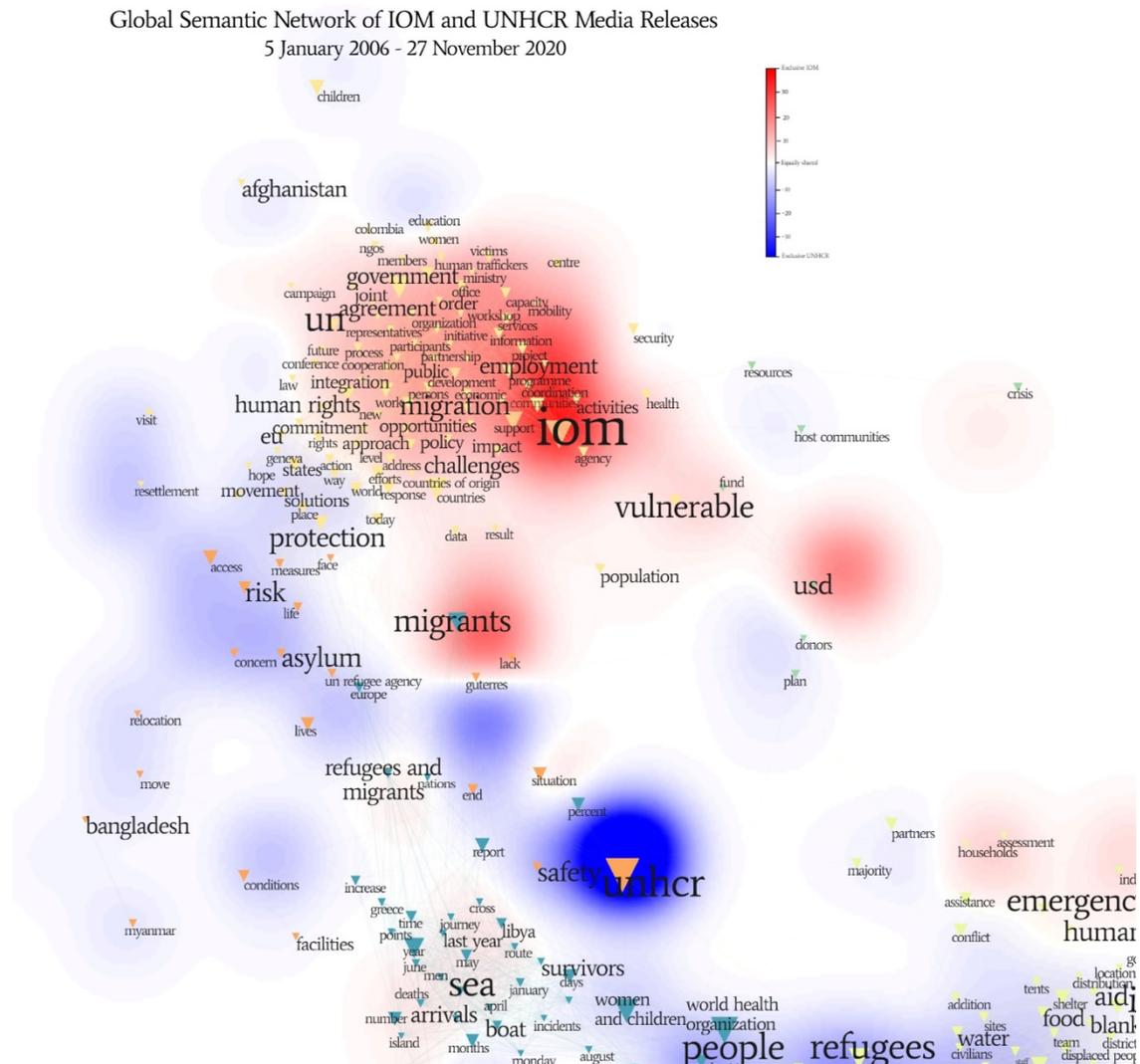


Figure 2. Focus on top portion of global semantic network, full time period, with overlaid heatmap.

If one examines more closely the red cluster at the top (Figure 2), we can identify words that are strongly associated with each other, and with IOM. The big *IOM* node itself is self-referential and reflects the fact that IOM (just like UNHCR) uses its media releases to refer to (and publicise) its activities and priorities. Keywords around *IOM* include *migration*, *employment*, *UN*, *government* (and *ministry*), *support*, *services*, *human traffickers* (together with *women* and

victims), as well as cooperation (and partnership). These reflect IOM’s core activities: working with governments and the UN, providing support and services to governments, fighting human trafficking and taking care of victims, fostering cooperation and partnerships, organizing conferences, and so on. The word vulnerable is also important, but situated apart, slightly in the direction of UNHCR and in a pale-red zone: this indicates that, even though IOM talks more about vulnerable people, it shares to some extent this word with UNHCR. Security is also quite close to the IOM-dominated cluster, but in a white zone that shows that the word is also used by UNHCR.

In the bottom-half of Figure 2, one can find another cluster populated by a number of words that are shared by both IOs, and which gradually become more specific to the UNHCR. This is the case with human rights, states (and countries), as well as protection - words that are used by both agencies. This is also the case with world, efforts, action, solutions, or impact. Both IOM and UNHCR are indeed concerned with the world at large, work with states, seek solutions and take actions in order to have an impact on the rights and protection of people on the move. Further below are words that are more strongly associated with UNHCR, like asylum or risk. One can similarly observe the position of migrants and refugees and migrants, which make for a continuum from IOM to UNHCR. They reflect an in-between area, in which both IOM and UNHCR are present (see next section for a more detailed discussion).

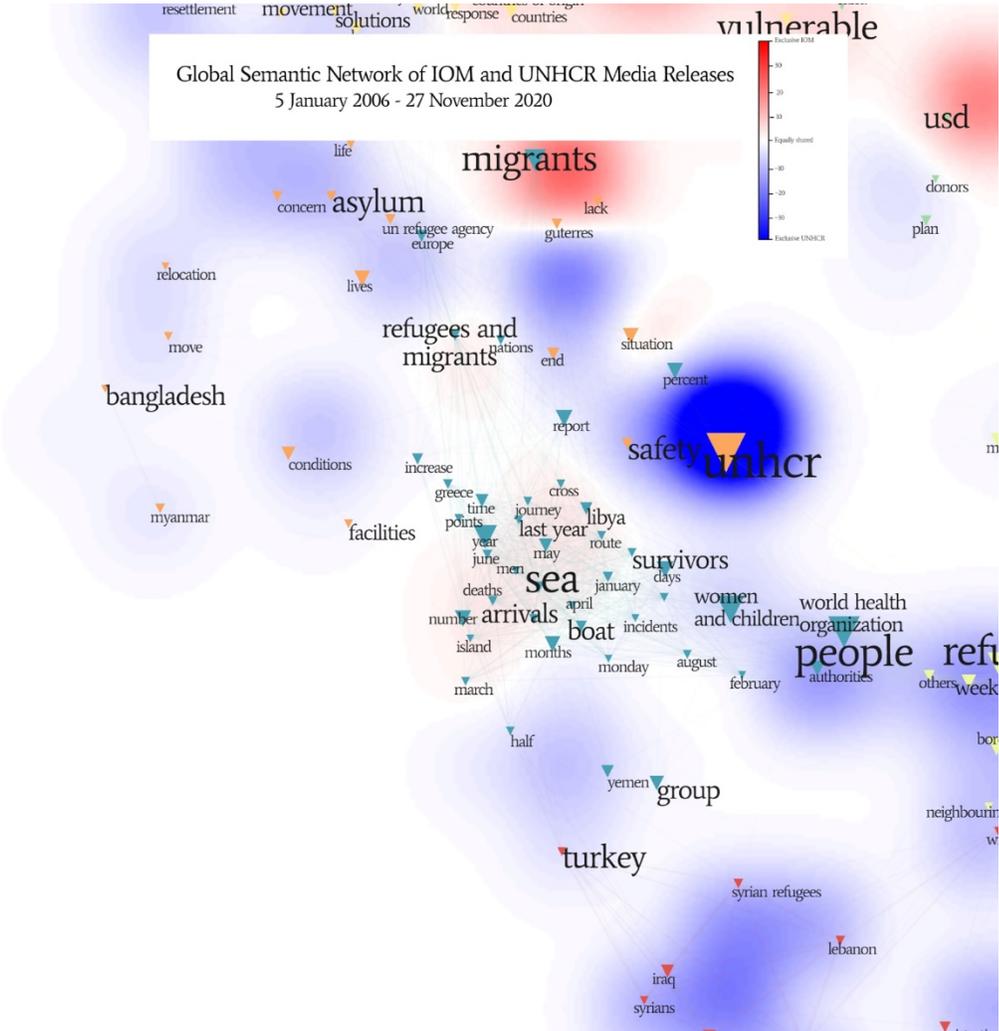


Figure 3. Focus on bottom left portion of global semantic network, full time period, with overlaid heatmap.



specifically to certain issues/tasks. Yet, one can also observe that IOM's red colour is present at different places throughout the figure, even in zones that are otherwise blue-dominated (like in the humanitarian cluster of Figure 4). This suggests that, even though UNHCR is central, IOM is a 'challenging' institution that progressively moves away from its own specialised cluster and appears here and there in zones that are otherwise fairly UNHCR-dominated.

Overall, the analysis so far suggests that UNHCR and IOM are characterised by specific textual patterns, which relate to their respective mandates and activities. But the existence of clear discursive specificities coexists with significant overlaps in terms of functional activities, especially as far as humanitarian assistance, shelter, food and internally displaced persons are concerned. This echoes the diverging interpretations discussed above, and the fact that IOM and UNHCR are at the same time quite different *and* connected to each other. In order to deepen the analysis, we now turn to a diachronic approach, not focusing on the global picture but on changes over time.

### **'Refugees', 'migrants' and 'refugees and migrants'**

As discussed above, a central issue in the way IOs (and other actors) talk about migration is the labels that are used to refer to people on the move. This section explores this issue by looking at the words used by IOM and UNHCR, with a focus on three possibilities: *migrants*, *refugees*, and *refugees and migrants*.

Typically, IOM is associated with migrants and UNHCR with refugees. In its glossary, IOM notes that there are 'no universally accepted definition' for the word 'migrant', which does not therefore refer to a category in the legal sense of the term. But it proposes its own definition: 'a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons'. It adds that it follows an 'inclusivist' approach, according to which the concept encompasses 'all forms of movement', including therefore forced migration and refugees (IOM 2019: 132-133). This is convenient, as IOM can therefore use the word 'migrant' to designate any person on the move, whatever the legal status, the motivation, etc.

This contrasts with UNHCR, which defines refugees as 'people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country'.<sup>2</sup> While this is in line with the standard definition contained in the Geneva Convention<sup>3</sup>, it raises the problem of how to call people on the move when their status is unclear, and of how to address complex 'mixed flows' situations in which both refugees and non-refugees are to be found. In the face of this long-standing difficulty, UNHCR clarified its terminology in a 2016 FAQs document<sup>4</sup>, in which it explains that, unlike IOM, it refuses to speak of 'migrants' as encompassing both migrants and refugees. It states that its 'preferred practice is to refer to groups of people travelling in mixed movements as 'refugees and migrants''. This 'refugees and migrants' label thus acknowledges the connections between the two terms, while at the same time maintaining the distinction.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html>

<sup>3</sup> 'Any person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country'.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/3/56e95c676/refugees-migrants-frequently-asked-questions-faqs.html>

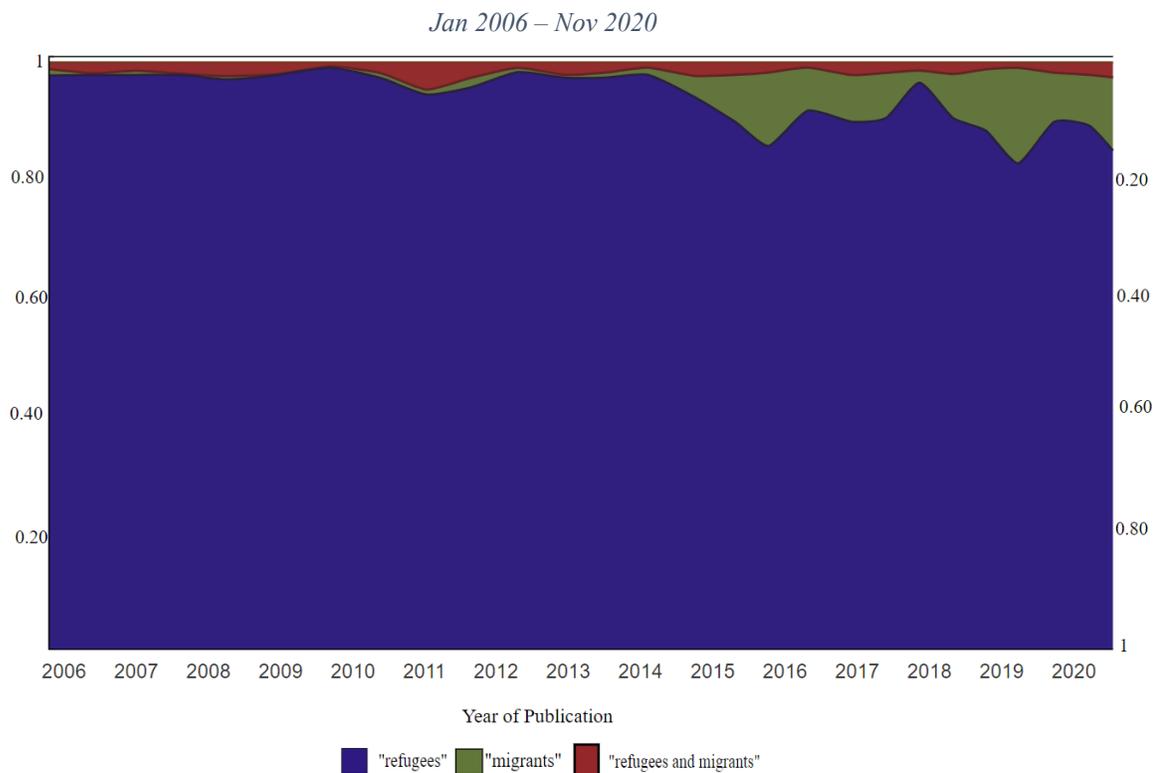
Table 1 shows the raw counts of each of these three terms in our corpus. Overall, the word *refugee* is the most frequent.<sup>5</sup> The word *migrant* comes next and there is a significant use of the *refugee and migrant* terminology.

Table 1. 'refugees', 'migrants', 'refugees & migrants' raw counts across corpus

Main form	Forms	Frequency	Distinct number of documents
migrants	migrant & migrants	10,919	2,019
refugee migrant	and refugee & migrant  &  refugees & migrants  &  refugee and migrant  &  refugees and migrants  &  migrant & refugee  &  migrant and refugee  &  migrants & refugees  &  migrants and refugees	1,593	723
refugees	refugee & refugees	21,635	3,604

Figure 5 focuses on UNHCR and shows the use of all three labels by this organization throughout the time period. Refugees is clearly the dominant terminology in UNHCR media releases and refugees and migrants remains marginal. In practice therefore, while UNHCR states that refugees and migrants is its preferred label, it hardly uses it in its media releases and sticks to the classical refugees label. The real evolution concerns the migrant label: while UNHCR used to ignore this label, one can observe a shift as of 2014-2015, with the emergence of this word in non-negligible proportions.

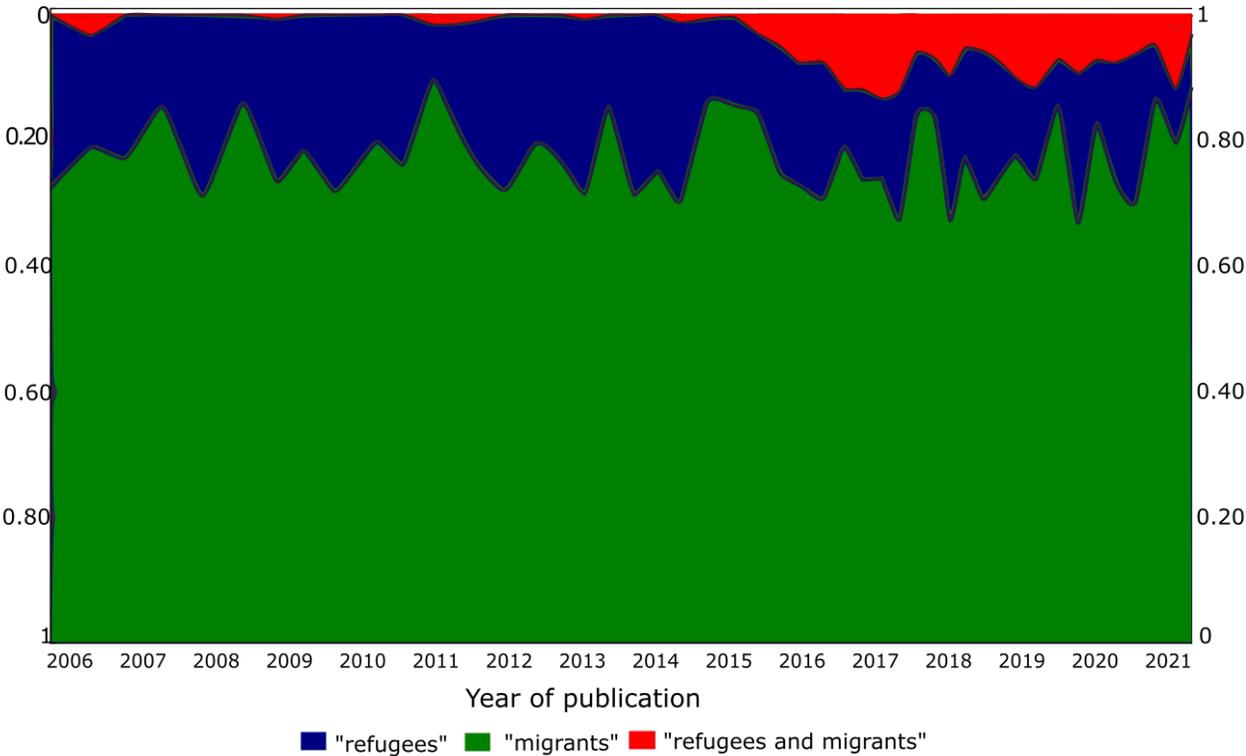
Figure 5. Proportional use of the terms "refugees", "migrants", and "refugees and migrants" by UNHCR



<sup>5</sup> Note that in these proportions, the term “refugees” as nested within the term “high Commissioner for Refugees” is accounted for by creating a null term in the uploaded terms list, effectively disregarding all nested occurrences of “refugees.”

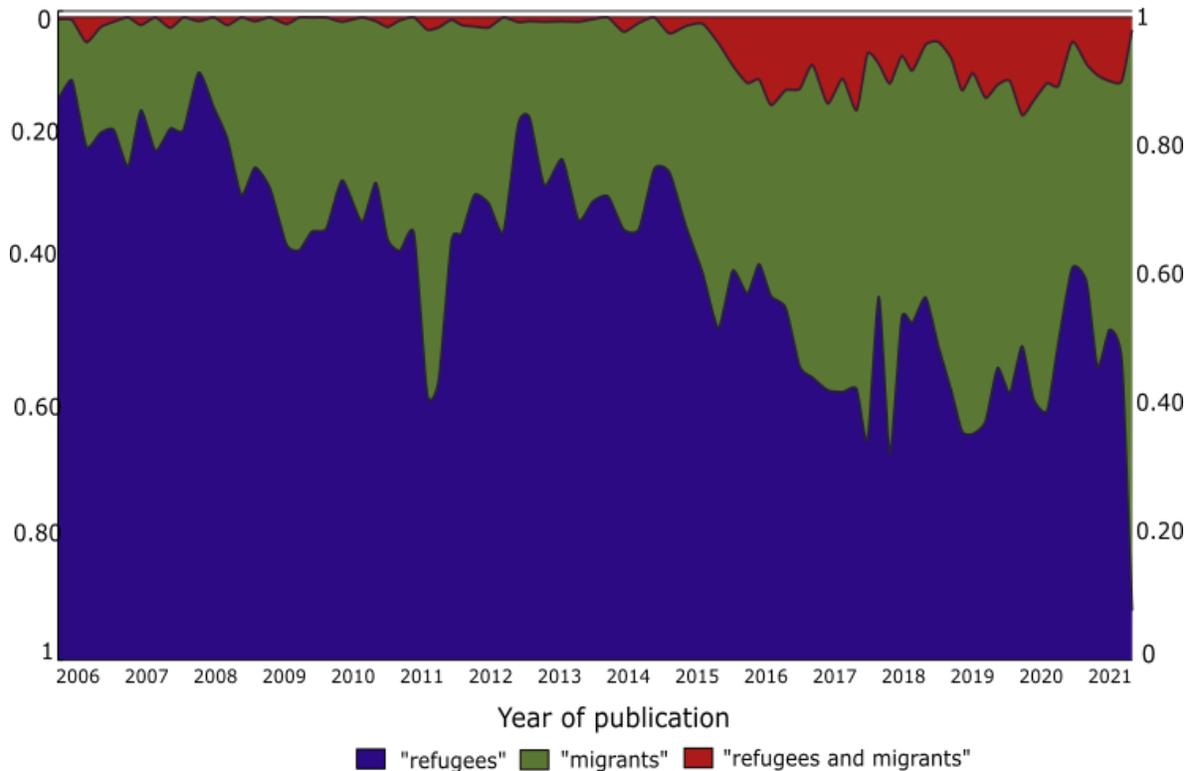
If one now turns to IOM's media releases (Figure 6), the picture is slightly different. As was to be expected, this agency predominantly speaks of *migrants*. But it also refers to *refugees*, with no significant evolution throughout the period. The most notable change concerns the *refugees and migrants* label, which appears as of 2014-2015 (thus exactly when UNHCR starts speaking of *migrants*). IOM's narratives are therefore fairly stable, with a focus on *migrants* – but without ignoring the existence of non-migrants like *refugees*. This paradoxically stands in contradiction with its own definition: IOM claims that *migrant* is a generic term that also encompasses *refugees*, but in practice it recognises the difference between the two labels and uses both. UNHCR is less stable: it starts by considering only *refugees*, but then seems to acknowledge the existence of non-refugees by speaking of *migrants*. Here again, this is in contradiction with its own recommendations: UNHCR advocates the *refugees and migrants* label, but hardly uses it (at least in its media releases). It is IOM that is responsible for the emergence of this new label.

Figure 6. Proportional use of the terms "refugees", "migrants", and "refugees and migrants" by IOM



If one looks at media releases by IOM and UNHCR together (Figure 7), one can logically observe that until circa 2014 the terms *migrants* and *refugees* were used to the exclusion of other terms, before the label *refugees and migrants* emerged. This suggests that the difference between *refugees* and *migrants* used to be quite straightforward, with different narratives referring distinctly to one of the two categories. With the expression *refugees and migrants*, the picture became more complex, as narratives acknowledge the possibility of complex situations that escape the migrant/refugee dichotomy. The overall picture further shows the decline in the use of the *refugees* label: it used to be the most frequent term, but progressively became less dominant. By contrast, references to *migrants* increased. The term *refugees and migrants* therefore challenged the *refugees* label, but not the *migrant* one.

Figure 7. Proportional use of the terms "refugees", "migrants", and "refugees and migrants" by both IOM and UNHCR



The media releases that compose our corpus address migration and asylum developments throughout the world and it is therefore difficult to single out specific events that would explain certain changes in the terminology. Our analysis does not aim at connecting 'real world' events to changes in narratives, an endeavour that would require additional research. Yet, it seems plausible to consider that the changes that took place in 2014-2015 coincide with the peak of the refugee/migration crisis in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The hypothesis would then be that the heated debates regarding the nature and legal definition of people on the move challenged the refugee/migrant dichotomy and favoured the recourse to the *refugees and migrants* label.

In addition, in terms of UN developments, this trend accompanied the discussions that led to the 2016 *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*: this document brought together both labels in a significantly innovative way, and paved the way for the drafting and adoption of the two Compacts. Changes in narratives thus clearly mirror changes in intergovernmental discussions over global migration governance.

This being said, the 2014-2015 events did not alter the global trend: overall, one can witness a 'de-refuge-isation' of global migration governance narratives, as our corpus becomes growingly refugee-unspecific – in the sense that it speaks more and more of *migrants* in general, or of *refugees and migrants* together, and less of *refugees* only.

### Talking about 'boat' migration over time

The previous section makes clear that narratives change over time. In terms of the general picture, IOM and UNHCR have, as discussed in section 4, different ways of talking. But this is not to say that they are characterised by monolithic discursive patterns: rather, there is evidence that their







This evolution is not surprising: given the importance of the migrant/refugee crisis in the Euro-Mediterranean region for global migration governance, it is logical to observe these changes in the use of the word *boat*. What is striking, however, is that the boat-related semantic cluster has changed organizations: once associated with UNHCR, it turns into an IOM-dominated zone by the end of the period.

Two observations can be made here. First, one can observe that, as far as narratives are concerned, IOM has taken over boat-related issues from UNHCR at the same time that the topic was getting closer to Europe. This hypothesis is supported by research on IOM, which stress the donor-driven nature of its activities and the priority given to the issues that matter most to its Western funding states. Working on IOM's projects in Libya, Brachet (2016) shows for example that this organization is above all concerned with reducing out-migration from North Africa to Europe, and much less with what happens inside the country, far away from the coasts. From that perspective, the greater the connection between boat-clusters and Europe, the more IOM will talk about it. When boat migration is associated with other regions (like the Horn of Africa), it is rather UNHCR that is concerned.

Second, one can observe that since the mid-2010s IOM has actively developed its expertise on maritime migration, and that these efforts may have helped this organization take the lead in the narratives on this issue. The main initiative by IOM is the Missing Migrants Projects (MPP)<sup>6</sup>, which was kicked off in 2014 in reaction to a major shipwreck that took place near the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2013 and killed almost 400 migrants. The objective of this project is to produce data and analyses about migrants' deaths; while the focus is not exclusively on boat migration, the strong connexion between boat migration and migrant deaths means that IOM has become an authority in the field. As a matter of fact, the words *missing migrants projects* appear in the latest boat-cluster (Figure 12), indicating how this project is now closely associated with boat migration in IOs' narratives. It is also in 2014 that the boat-cluster started changing colour (Figure 10).

Al Tamimi et al. (2020) argue that with the MPP managed to become the central actor on a highly topical issue, and that it managed to marginalise the civil society groups that used to be the core actors in this field (see also Heller and Pécoud 2020). They also document how UNHCR had also attempted to count migrant deaths, but with less ambitions than IOM. From that perspective, changes in narratives are linked to IOs' strategies and IOM's MPP was crucial in enabling this organization to appropriate a topic that used to be associated with UNHCR's narratives.

## Conclusion

The textual analysis of media releases by IOM and UNHCR enables a careful and nuanced assessment of how these two IOs talk about migrants and refugees. It makes clear that UNHCR and IOM produce specific textual patterns, which are different from each other and consistent with their respective mandates and activities. As far as their narratives are concerned, therefore, IOM and UNHCR display significant differences. Moreover, IOM and UNHCR respond to real world developments: this obviously corresponds to one of IOs' key roles, which is to describe and document ongoing global dynamics. The migrant/refugee crisis in the Euro-Mediterranean region has indeed been showed to influence their narratives, notably by introducing the new *refugees and migrants* label.

Yet, the clear differences between IOM and UNHCR coexist with zones of overlap. By analysing the case of the word *boat*, we show that the issue of maritime migration is to be found in the narratives of both agencies. But it is not addressed in the same way, nor at the same time.

<sup>6</sup> <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

This suggests the possible existence of discursive competition, as the same topic can be of relevance to any of the two organizations – and can change sides according to circumstances and strategies. The case of *boat* would then confirm the idea, developed by several authors and recalled at the beginning of this article, that UNHCR is challenged by IOM and sees some of its missions ‘stolen’ by its rival. This being said, this article has not investigated the fate of other words and we cannot therefore exclude that, on other issues, the reverse trend could be observed.

We have here identified only a small aspect of the overall debates which took place in migration governance over these years, namely of maritime migration patterns and the distinction between *refugees*, *migrants*, and *refugees and migrants*. However this is but a small subset of the changes to migration narratives which occurred during this time period and could be identified using the qualitative/quantitative methodologies we have employed. By analysing a relatively large corpus and visualising the network of words’ relationships with others we have, in a manner of speaking, quantified phenomena that have yet been qualifiedly described. What would remain is to further investigate the exploratory results of this enquiry to either identify either the origins of narratives more thoroughly, or to explain the mechanisms through which narratives propagate and develop.

There are quite a few other research questions that our analysis does not respond to. For example, we could speculate about the influence of member-states: assuming that IOs do what they are instructed to do, one could ask whether the changes in their narratives correspond to changes in the policy strategies (and funding) determined by governments. Our analysis rather posits that IOs display a certain level of agency and autonomy, at least as far as their communication is concerned; moreover, there is little evidence available on changes of this kind (in the form of, say, a decision by influential governments to ask UNHCR to withdraw from the issue of maritime migration). On a different note, it could be argued that IOs do not necessarily have the same internal strategies, for example in terms of communication. Changes in narratives could then be explained by the resources invested in media releases. Our analysis assumes that both IOM and UNHCR are keen on communicating, and that they do so in a comparable way throughout the time period. These are questions that would require further research.

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